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# LEADING TOGETHER IN GROWING METHODIST CHURCHES

Learning from research and practice in the North East of England



## RESEARCH SUMMARY

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The researchers would also like to gratefully acknowledge the permission and support received from the featured churches, who were willing to share their own experiences and learning as they sought to grow within their own particular contexts.

Further information on Dr Andrew Orton as the lead author, including free electronic versions of publications from other related research, is available at: [www.dur.ac.uk/sass/staff/profile/?mode=staff&id=3292](http://www.dur.ac.uk/sass/staff/profile/?mode=staff&id=3292)

All attendance and membership-related numbers (including averages) have been given to the nearest whole number. Percentages are all rounded to one decimal place. All averages are arithmetic means, unless otherwise stated.

# Introduction to the research

## This research sought to address this question:

“What can the wider Church learn from six selected Methodist churches in the North East of England about the processes and factors which are supporting and inhibiting growth in their context?”

## This question was considered in the context of wider debates, including those concerning:

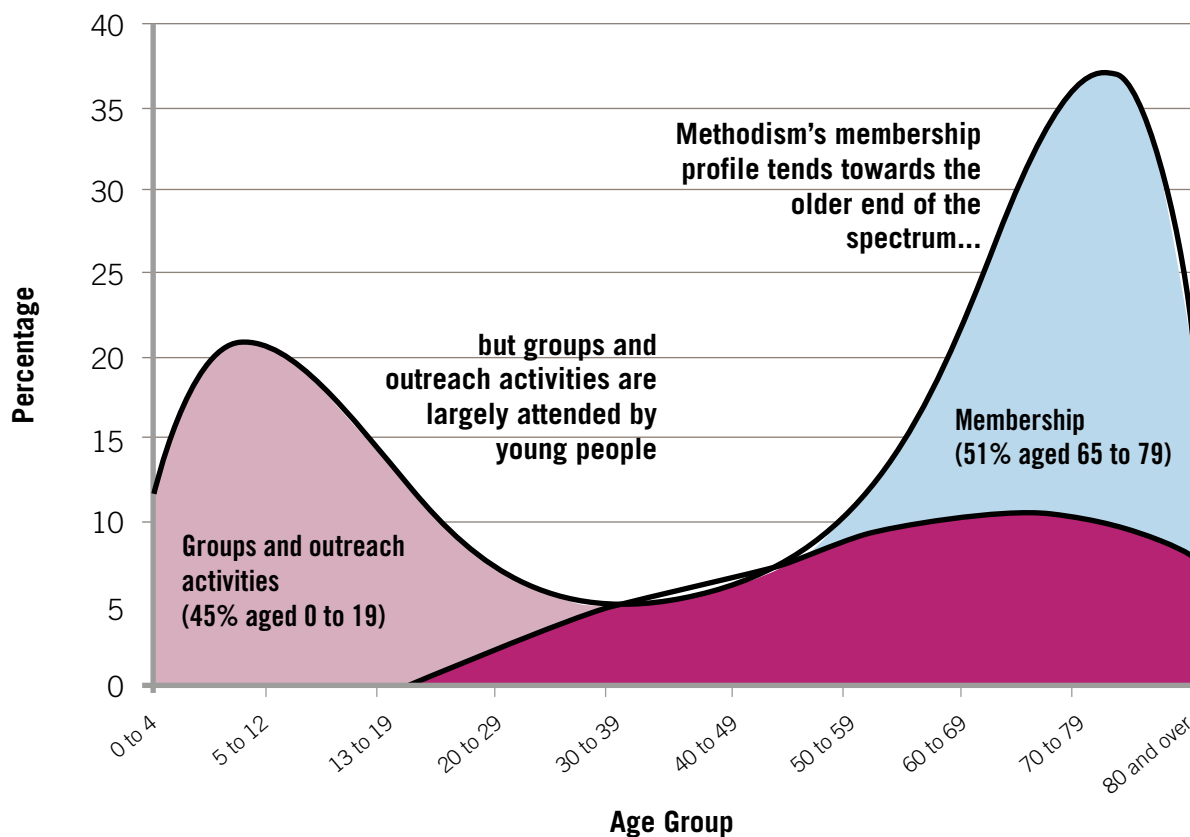
- **Rapidly changing social contexts.** These include debates over changing patterns of increased secular and religious diversity, as well as how the Church should understand and engage in God’s mission in this context.
- **Different views of growth.** These included views which focus on growth in discipleship and/or growth in numbers - as well as debates over whether growth can be measured, and if so, how and using what measures. It has long been recognised that there can be particular differences, for example, between dimensions of religious identification, belief, belonging, and acting; there are also changing patterns of participation in religious communities in the context of contemporary social lives (e.g. see Davie, 2007).
- **Questions about whether churches have adopted a ‘theology of decline’** which is exacerbating trends influenced by social changes (Goodhew, 2015:13). If so, Goodhew argues that this may require churches to take on a widened focus which includes a renewed consideration of numbers alongside a range of other understandings and measures of church growth.
- **Changing forms and patterns of leadership and ministry,** lay and ordained, within these contexts, and how different ministries might best work together.

## The national context:

- Decline in Methodist Church membership is a **long term trend:** there was a decline of 17.0% between 2009 and 2014, and a decline of 15.1% in weekly attendance, with membership in local churches at 31st October 2014 standing at 201,714.
- The Methodist Church has an **ageing demographic** of members, with “2,527 people received into membership during the course of the year compared with 5,962 member deaths, giving a deaths to new membership ratio of 2.4.”
- **Where there is numerical growth in membership, it is concentrated in a minority of churches:**  
“Almost 80% of Local Churches (3,348 out of 4,254) did not receive any new members... [and] fewer than 5% (201 churches) received four or more new members in the course of the year – this latter group accounting for just over half of new members in total.”

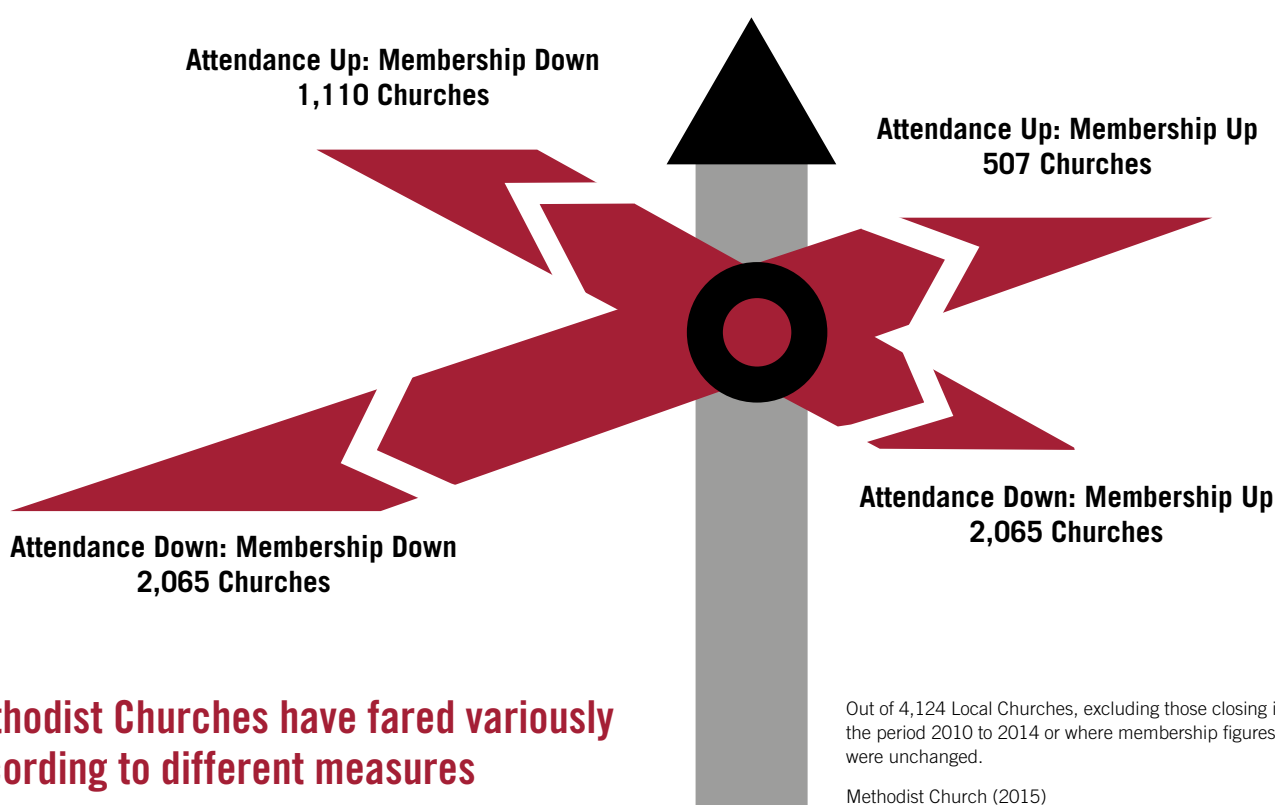
(Quotes from Methodist Council, 2016:2-3, using figures from 2014, supplemented with national Methodist Church statistics supplied by the Connexional Team)

# Age Distribution: Twin Peaks



Methodist Church (2015) based on in-house membership survey 2011 and analysis of groups and outreach activities 2013.

## Mixed Signals...





## The regional context in the North East of England:

- There were **294 Methodist churches** in Newcastle and Darlington districts in 2014.
- **Average attendance in each church was 38 people** on a Sunday, and 46 at midweek activities.
- **Average membership was 44 members** in each Methodist church.

However, four churches with very high memberships of over 200 skew this average membership figure, so the median of 27 may be more representative of the typical number of members in a congregation.

## The overall pattern of church attendance in the North East is one of decline in participation:

- Over the five year period 2009-2014, both **Sunday and whole week attendance in Methodist churches in the North East declined by 13.0%**.
- **Membership** has experienced a total decline of 14.6% over five years and 10.3% over three years.

## However, this is a complex picture:

- **It depends what you mean by 'growth'**— there are a range of different measures, including significant differences in figures between measures of attendance and membership. Some aspects of growth, such as spiritual growth, may be harder to measure.
- **Some congregations are bucking the overall trend of numerical decline.** Without these, the overall picture would be of even sharper numerical decline; e.g. only 17.3% of Methodist churches in the North East reported a higher membership in 2014 compared to 2011, although 37.9% reported higher weekly attendance.
- **Patterns** within the overall picture may vary depending on what measure you use, and over what time period. There can also be complex patterns within particular congregations which mean growth in some activities may be masked by decline in others. Factors contributing to numerical decline may not just be due to people leaving, but can also be because, for example, members of ageing congregations die or become less mobile and often less able to attend as they get older.

## This research was based on:

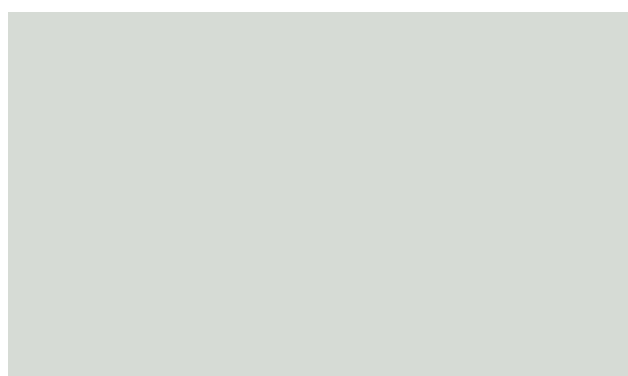
- **Statistical analysis** of annual returns made by churches to the Methodist Church at a national level up to 2014. (These statistics were the most recent available at the time of starting the research.)
- **Participant observations** of activities important in the life of that church over a short fixed period of several weeks. These observations included conversations with those present in the churches' activities and those who were encountering these churches in their engagement with wider local communities.
- More detailed **individual and group interviews** with 'leaders', using a broad understanding of leadership which included anyone recognised locally as leading in that context.
- Within the observations and interviews, the researchers paid **particular attention to the views of those who had relatively newly begun participating, and those on the fringes of activities/church life**, exploring how they had become involved. The researchers also considered carefully the narratives of how more established members had become involved, and the perspectives of those in positions of leadership, comparing and contrasting these.

## The churches studied

Six case study churches in different areas (Blaydon, Jesmond, Marton, Newcastle Chinese Methodist Church, Ponteland and Spennymoor) were studied as part of the research project. These reflected a diverse range of sizes (from 8 to 124 attendees at Sunday services based on 2014 statistical returns), with diverse staffing and team structures, based in different areas, with different apparent types and patterns of growth.

These were chosen:

- Because they each appeared to have a potentially **different story to tell**;
- Based on statistics combining **various different potential measures of growth** over 3 to 5 years and/or **recommendations** by District staff;
- Because together **they reflected a broad range** of churches and ways in which growth was perceived to be happening across a range of different contexts;
- **Not because they were perfect examples** of growth in any or all ways.



# Summary of factors contributing to growth

Each church had its own experience of change. For example, the Chinese congregation studied had grown rapidly since beginning as a group in 2008. This had involved a different experience of change to the very small church in an urban centre that was studied, which had previously been on the verge of closure but had become recently reinvigorated by community engagement. These experiences differed again from those of a suburban church in a relatively affluent area, which had initially focused on seeking to grow through setting up a new contemporary service. These differed again from another church in a much less affluent area that was multigenerational and had focused on running multiple activities which embedded it within the local community.

However, beyond an overall recognition by leaders of the dependence of these churches on God as ultimately responsible for any growth, there were five key themes which emerged across the churches as supporting growth when they were present, and inhibiting it when they were not.

These were:

- 1. Being welcoming, hospitable and caring as a church community**
- 2. Being responsive and actively inclusive of a wider range of people.**
- 3. Making available accessible intentional spiritual development opportunities.**
- 4. Participatory and collaborative leadership.**
- 5. Provision of support which enabled change and overcame barriers.**

These worked together to create virtuous “cycles of growth” (Jackson, 2005:13), even when starting from small beginnings. In our research, this was happening through churches being welcoming and responsive whilst creating opportunities for inclusion, participation and spiritual development within connected church communities. These churches were then becoming continually enlarged in their capacity to further develop their involvement in mission in that area.

Such an approach builds on Methodism’s traditional strengths in community activities and engagement, and was highly consistent with Methodism’s Connexional focus on being ‘a discipleship movement shaped for mission’, by connecting these together.





## 2. Being welcoming, hospitable and caring as a church community

- Initial impressions of welcome at people's first point of contact were very important.

"I think the biggest thing for congregations is the key point of welcome. And I don't just mean on the door, like [when] somebody's coming in, but in a much broader sense, as to how willing they are to enable these people, whoever they may be, [who are] enjoying coming along, to actually feel like a part of the community of the church."

(Minister)

- Small acts of unconditional kindness and hospitality featured in lots of the accounts from those who had become participants over the longer term — this involved existing people who were part of the church community making room for people, thinking of their needs and responding to their requests and ideas; *e.g. offering directions to those trying to find their way around the local area; provision for children during activities; offering lifts to those who need them so they can attend activities; providing food/refreshments taking into account people's preferences; knitting groups supporting each other's welfare (including calling and visiting absent members) whilst giving away knitted clothes to those who need them, etc.*
- Helping to extend the welcome by encouraging people to come back, and by being a 'sticky' community which helps people to stay connected after the first encounter; *e.g. through offering a follow-up phone call and individual conversation over coffee to new students arriving in the area.*

"I came back ... and then just stuck. ... When people try here, they stay."

(Lay worker who first attended as a student)

- Getting to know people, by building friendships and a welcoming family atmosphere which avoids cliques; *e.g. how many people say hello to a new person and engage them in conversation, not just what the person on the door does; remembering personal details of people's lives.*
- Unconditional caring for people, especially those experiencing difficulties; *e.g. visiting them; chaplains visiting local businesses; providing consistent supportive pastoral care which values everyone, including existing members; being supportive at times such as bereavements, funerals and services of remembrance when people come into contact with the church.*
- Making welcome and care part of the ethos and practices of the church; *e.g. one of the churches had included 'Family News' as part of the notices and prayers, in which people shared personal items from their lives (such as good news or health concerns) if they wished, as well as events.*

"If our own church family is not feeling secure and fed and cared for and worth something of value, then, if that core isn't there, you're not going to be able to do the things in mission that you want to do."

(Minister)

## The impact of church buildings and public information

Buildings were found to both help and hinder the welcome provided. Some of the churches had found that making changes to buildings to make them more open and accessible had been important in changing public perceptions of welcome. For example, physical changes to ensure accessibility for disabled people and welcoming entrances helped. However, the buildings were often found to present barriers to participation. *For example, in the research observations, the researchers frequently encountered locked/jammed doors, unclear entrances, lack of signage, and once a website with the wrong service time listed on it. All of these features made it difficult to participate even when we wanted to, and could easily have meant other people would be unable to get in, even if they had turned up to participate.* There were times when researchers were only able to join in because they had the mobile number of the person running an activity, or were willing to wander around for several minutes within vast buildings without being greeted in order to find an activity taking place in a back room. This was contrasted with the more welcoming practice in other churches, *such as in one larger church, where those arriving were greeted by people at different points along the route from the door (where programmes were being handed out) as they moved to the entrance to the worship area, and then on to where people first sat in particular seats.*

Public information was also important in communicating the welcome; *e.g. providing clear signage, ensuring it is clear which entrance to use, up-to-date websites and programme information, etc.* Improving these things so they explain activities more fully and make more sense to someone who is not yet part of the church community can send a strong signal of openness and welcome.



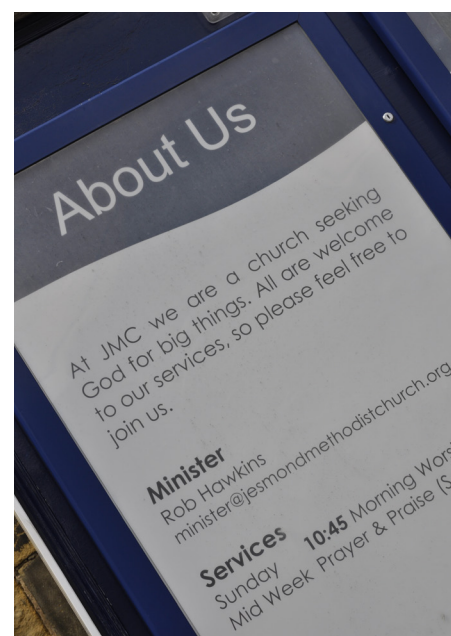




## Building relationships

Relationships were even more important, including, for example:

- Personal invitations to let people know about the range of activities available and to encourage them to join in with whichever activities they wished.
- Making spaces for people to get to know each other better.
- Being aware of people's different preferences in terms of interpersonal engagement - for example, several stewards were concerned not to be too overbearing, agreeing that "you haven't got to overwhelm" those attending for the first time.
- Welcoming families who wish their children to be baptised, taking time to engage with these parents and families. This included emphasising this welcome through small symbolic acts such as using children's pictures during the baptism service, adapting services to reflect the families concerned, putting the names of everyone baptised on a butterfly shape and sticking this onto a wall display to show they are now part of the church, and having children's activities to which the children could be invited afterwards.
- Being willing to go beyond just passively welcoming those who may turn up to existing activities, by extending the welcome and hospitality more broadly, as the following sections consider.



## 2. Being responsive and actively inclusive of a wider range of people

**Key starting points** for including a wider range of people within the case study churches had included:

- **Listening to where they understood God was leading them**, as individuals, a church, a Circuit, including through prayer.
- **Listening to those in the wider communities** through building relationships with different individuals and groups, including with:
  1. *Those with whom they already have links*, including through existing community relationships and activities, and those on the fringes of their current links.
  2. *Those who have left or are leaving the Church, and those who have had bad previous experiences of churches* (in this and/or other denominations), and being willing to hear the reasons why; e.g. by inviting those known to be in this situation round to lunch to hear their experiences, and asking what would make a difference which would enable them to participate.
  3. *Those within local communities more widely with whom they may not yet have contact, recognising their diversity*; e.g. by setting up a Chinese congregation in an inner city (whilst also recognising language and cultural differences between those attending this congregation); by doing outreach work as a team to listen to local young people who are out on the streets at night, and then setting up a youth drop-in on Friday nights in response to their concern of having somewhere safe to go.
- **Being open and willing to change** what is offered to actively respond to what was heard (starting with those who were willing to respond, if all in the existing congregation were not).





This change involved more than just making additional efforts to advertise and invite people into existing church activities. It also involved more than just welcoming these people when they turned up (if they were willing to integrate into what was already on offer). Instead, it also involved **creating new forms of engagement** by working together with particular groups; for example, by changing times, formats, languages; adjusting expectations to take account of cultural differences and modern working patterns; ensuring more inclusive practices by finding out what was excluding people and changing this (e.g. what provision was made and what welcome was given to those arriving with a noisy baby, etc.).

- This often involved **different responses for different groups** (whether, for example, young people, families, 'missing generation/s', those who had become disillusioned with traditional forms of church, a particular ethnic group, students and young professionals, older people, etc.).
- Churches with limited capacity and resources were not always able to respond to every possible group in the wider community. For churches in this situation, the process of change sometimes involved starting by **prioritising** ways of making connections with and responding to particular groups. They had then responded based on what they had heard, taking into account each church's own perception of where they could start, given the people, skills and other assets they had.

***It wasn't about every church trying to do everything with everyone.*** There was however often crossover between the different activities that were being run, with people having connections with the church in more than one way (e.g. attending more than one activity, or different generations of the same family attending different activities). Where this happened, it often helped mutually reinforce the relationships and sense of inclusion and belonging of those becoming connected as part of this community.

- Increased responsiveness to groups within the local community was helpfully supported in some cases by going beyond traditional advertising to include the use of more interactive forms of media. For example, some of the churches had made good **use of social media** to engage with people in the local communities beyond their churches, and listen to their comments, as well as sharing invitations to activities being organised. In some of the churches, several parents and carers of toddlers had started attending family activities having seen events advertised this way.



"The day I put on about the Christmas hampers on the Facebook page, we had 200 likes. .. I'll always put on our Facebook page what the service is ... Especially now we've got a lot of likes from the community, I'm increasing the amount of traffic ... to get a conversation going."

(Minister)



### Wider community engagement and community activities:

Activities which involved church members going out and becoming engaged in issues outside the building, as well as running activities which responded to community needs, were an important part of this responsiveness. These activities were seen as important for a range of reasons, including in:

- **Signalling openness and showing that the church cares** more widely than just its own existing members, and that it can be relevant to the whole of people's lives. Examples included by spreading messages of care through the local area (e.g. through knitted angels distributed around the town, with a note of explanation on them; gifts to charitable collections; Street Pastors schemes using the church foyer as a base, etc.) and socio-political engagement (e.g. a garden area being renovated by local apprentices, litter picks, speaking to MPs and campaigning on issues such as financial inclusion and benefit sanctions, etc.). One illustration of this was seen in comments by one newer member, who indicated that the main reason for growth was because "this church wants to get out there".
- **Providing multiple possible gateways and entry-points** to the church, where people who are not currently engaged can initially encounter parts of the church community and build relationships through activities on their own terms (e.g. in slimming clubs, drop-in youth activities, food banks, community/soup lunches, barbeques, Cantonese language classes for children, Knit and Natter groups, etc.).
- **Demonstrating how diverse groups of people are invited** to participate in the churches' activities, whilst providing personal opportunities which extended this invitation and welcome. Such demonstrations illustrated to these wider groups how the church is willing to respond to find ways to include people 'like them'. For example, being at the 'church search' university event for new university students, going to the school gates to advertise a new 'tea and toast' session for parents, invitations being extended to people with learning disabilities living locally and their carers to attend a café church service, inviting uniformed youth organisations (Girls' Brigade, Cubs, etc.) to join in with an adapted parade service, students and parents being invited back to activities after attending the first time, etc.



## Beginning to belong: why opportunities to contribute matter

Our research focused particularly on seeking the perspectives of those who had become newly engaged in the churches studied. Through this, we heard how they understood the process that had led them to become increasingly engaged with that church and form a sense of belonging in the church community.

For these people, the process of becoming involved was about more than just passively attending particular activities, however welcoming these were seen to be. Instead, people repeatedly described how their initial impression of welcome and inclusion had developed through their participation into feeling part of the church community in practice. This had happened when they had been able to contribute themselves

in their own ways, building on their own particular skills and gifts. In the first instance, this might have been simply helping out in practical ways such as at a foodbank, making refreshments and sandwiches, when the church took up offers of support from the wider community in delivering Christmas hampers to those referred, etc.

This often meant those within the church consciously inviting and encouraging people's interests whilst creating spaces for people to become involved. For example, one church had invited the cubs to help with a coffee morning for their badge; a key feature of opportunities such as this was that they helped to build relationships between the church members and those attending this group, whilst showing the group members that their participation in the church community was valued.

“The cubs want to come and they’ve got to do some particular work for a badge, and its about fundraising and helping others .... There’s going to be a big church coffee morning in about a month’s time—perfect timing. The kids can come along, help do some of the washing up, servicing some of the cups of coffee, and what have you, helps to meet some of the church members and integrate maybe a bit more than they would on a normal parade service despite the [normal] coffee arrangement afterwards.”

(Steward)



Whilst being invited to contribute in this way was a feature of many people's stories, participants also emphasised how it was important that the choice of when and how they contributed was up to those concerned. It was important that there was no pressure to contribute or become involved in any particular activity if they did not wish to at that time; as one steward said, it was important to not try to sign people up to a regular rota of pre-established roles on the first day! The researchers observed people being encouraged to participate in helping with activities for the first time when they were ready, whilst being given choices about how and when, and the option to choose not to take on a more active role. It was important to respect the choices of those who just wanted to help out in community-focused activities. Many people involved primarily through these activities nevertheless reported feeling 'part of the church family' and valued this feeling of belonging. These feelings had often been reinforced when some of the churches had found symbolic ways of recognising such contributions as important within the church's life. These ways included taking advantage of opportunities presented by particular services and activities.

### **Examples included:**

- In one church, those with craft skills had been encouraged to contribute through making poppies to display in the church for Remembrance Sunday.
- Another church talked about using parade services as an opportunity to invite members of the Girls' Brigade (which also met in the church building) to participate in a church service if they wished to, and have their contribution as part of the wider church community acknowledged and appreciated by the wider church membership.
- The Chinese church had included children (including some from language classes run by the church) by inviting them to sing in the annual joint service. Across many of the churches, there were rotas to enable different people to contribute to regular roles such as contributing musically to the worship, etc.
- Creative scheduling of some activities in adjacent time slots and/or rooms, and/or invitations from one activity to another, helped strengthen people's cumulative links as part of the wider church community. Activities for different generations of the same family, with invitations for people to attend separately and/or together, also helped reinforce this collective sense of belonging.



### 3. Making available accessible intentional spiritual development opportunities that support people wishing to explore and engage in discipleship journeys together

Alongside these wider community activities, the case study churches had a common focus on:

- **Nurturing their own Christian faith** in various ways (including through prayer, Bible study, worship, social action, discipleship in people's everyday lives, etc.); and
- **Making available opportunities for others to join in** with these if they wished.

“For me, the key thing [in terms of church growth]... is the developing of a stronger or growing sense of spiritual fellowship. Because where that is coming together, it seems to be the magnet that then people are wanting to be part of.”

*(Superintendent Minister)*

Key principles that were seen as supporting the participation of new people in this central aspect of the Church's life together included:

- **Recognising the different starting points** of those coming into contact with the church. This included recognising that people may have had previous histories which affect their expectations. Part of making any opportunities for spiritual development accessible involved being aware that people will have had different journeys leading up to this point in their lives and may have had negative experiences of such spiritual development opportunities within this or other churches. This sometimes meant offering support to overcome related fears, including fears arising from not knowing what to expect (particularly for those people from a range of different denominational church backgrounds, and those who hadn't previously been connected to any church).
- **Being clear in advance which parts of the churches' activities include worship and opportunities to explore faith for themselves**, and which ones do not include religious activities as part of the programme. This enabled people to choose whether (and if so, when and how) they wished to engage with the Christian faith directly (e.g. in terms of worship, prayer, Bible study, discussion of how the Christian faith might affect everyday life, etc.). Being clear in advance helped show respect for the choices of those who just wish to participate in the community activities that are run by the church/in the church buildings. It ensured that when people do participate in activities designed to support spiritual development, they can do so as a choice, without feeling any pressure or coercion.
- **Providing supportive spaces for people through which they can explore participation with the church as a faith community, including for the first time.** This included building in spaces in programmes to create the potential for those who wish to make this particular step to be able to do so in a invited, welcoming and accessible way. In most places, this involved making new spaces which offered something different to a traditional Sunday service; for example, creating small groups and more interactive informal forms of church (such as through café church formats). Other examples included providing children's clubs which offered fun activities, children's songs, etc. to learn about the Christian faith.

- **Enabling people who do not identify as Christian to participate** and explore the Christian faith if they wish without first having to identify themselves as Christians and/or become members.

“So, me going there most weeks, and popping in and getting to know them has meant I could respond to their pastoral needs first, and then eventually they have then decided to try and come along to church again. I’ve never gone in with that agenda. But, at some point, they start asking about it, and then you go “Well why don’t you come in again?” So, that has taken two years of getting to know folk ... With café church, we get quite a few who come from craft club as well. One of those ... used to say she’s an atheist. I think she now says she’s an agnostic. That’s fine. But she’s been coming to café church before my time.”

*(Minister)*

- **Providing opportunities for people to discuss aspects of the Christian faith and their own personal journeys in ways which connected with their lives outside of the church community.** As some of the research respondents commented, this included answering the “So what?” question when sharing experiences of faith, by being clear “why this will make a difference in people’s lives”. Growth was seen to be enabled by “talk[ing] about their faith as if it matters to Monday morning, scratching where people itch in the week”. Clear everyday language was important within these discussions, including not assuming that everyone would necessarily understand the traditional language used in many churches. It also meant not assuming that everyone would necessarily know or follow the traditional patterns of church behaviour which had been inherited.
- Through a range of creative opportunities, the case study churches were considering and engaging in the challenging and transformational nature of discipleship together, **by linking individual discipleship and collective spiritual growth as a church community.**

## Supporting Christian faith development through small groups - An extended example: Trinity Methodist Church, Spennymoor

Trinity Methodist Church in Spennymoor is a mid-sized multigenerational church at the heart of the surrounding town in a relatively deprived area, with an average Sunday attendance of 68 in 2014. It had experienced a steady and consistent moderate growth in attendance (e.g. Sunday attendance up 18.4% over 5 years and weekly attendance up 7.1% in the same period). Overall membership numbers had just started to turn around from slight decline into slight growth. Whilst the Sunday service remained relatively traditional, several small groups connected to this church had been developed with particular support from a lay worker. These sought to support people in engaging with the Christian faith at different stages in their own journeys of life and faith, alongside the church's open community activities for everyone.

For younger people, the church offered (on alternate weeks): (i) an activity-based church youth group with a short reflective input for those just starting to explore the Christian faith; and (ii) a youth discussion group for those who wanted to explore Christian discipleship in a deeper, more sustained way, which explored topics decided upon by the group. The latter group had developed through a short course designed for young people who wanted to explore the Christian faith, followed by a youth residential. These groups were held in addition to the weekly open-access youth drop-in, which had no structured activities concerning the Christian faith. This open-access drop-in focussed on expressing care through listening to the often difficult situations of the individual young people attending and responding to their needs. In particular, the drop-in provided a safe space for them to socialise, even when they feared violence and harassment from others.

For adults, a programme of small groups called 'Come Vine with Me' had developed for those wanting to explore the Bible and discipleship

through discussion. This had developed from small beginnings into what was now three linked groups which met in different areas following a co-ordinated programme. This programme allowed groups to remain small enough for everyone to contribute. Anyone missing their own normal group's session (e.g. because of work shift patterns or family commitments) was able to attend an alternate group time if they wished. The groups met together periodically to share their learning, worship together, and agree what to explore next. These groups had different origins, including one which had been originally formed mainly out of a group of younger parents who had wanted space together to support their own faith development. Another had formed out of an Alpha group for those interested in exploring the Christian faith. This group was reported to include a range of people, including those who went to another church (which did not offer similar groups), those who saw this group as their church (either being unable or not wanting to go to church for Sunday services for various reasons), and those otherwise isolated who were able to attend when supported to do so. Sometimes these groups also included family members or others who had been invited, including those who had subsequently become involved having not previously attended church.

The church also supported a longer-established Bible Study group for older members which had run for over 20 years, led by people within the group on a rota. This group was observed to be tackling controversial issues relevant to contemporary society such as politics, discrimination, etc. in their discussions. Such discussions enabled members to share different views respectfully whilst reflecting together on their understandings of how the Bible and their Christian faith should affect their lives.

## Focusing on spiritual growth - An extended example: Jesmond Methodist Church

Jesmond Methodist Church is a church on the high street of an 'urban village' of shops, coffee shops and a public library in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The church had an average Sunday attendance of 39 in 2014. The surrounding area included a large number of people in private rented accommodation (50.7% of households, with owner occupier rates around 30% less than the national average). It also had a large number of young people and students, with 15-24 year olds making up 53.5% of the population in the ward, and average levels of education significantly above the national average. This had contributed to a comparatively high turnover within some groups such as students within the local population.

Within these local population patterns, statistical patterns of church attendance were variable. Historically, just over a decade ago, the church was reported as being small and thought likely to close, with an elderly congregation that had limited engagement with the wider local community. Since then, the congregation had gone through cycles of growth and decline, albeit with an overall longer term trend of gradual reduction in Sunday attendance and membership.

The average age of the congregation had reduced considerably through a reinvigorated engagement which included involving some younger leaders and flexible attempts to continually engage with the changing population. In this context, the church had been recommended to the research team by District staff as a potential site of renewal and emerging spiritual growth to be explored, which was making a wider contribution to church growth in the city. Whilst this wider contribution was not necessarily fully represented in their own congregational numbers, the church had endeavoured over a sustained period to go from being one expected to just consistently decline to one that was seen as having a future.

To do this, over several years, the congregation had built strategic links with a range of groups

through supporting and nurturing a range of initiatives. These included historically providing the initial venue for the Newcastle Chinese Methodist Church (discussed elsewhere in this report) before it moved to Brunswick Church. It also included supporting the development of the 'Holy Biscuit', an arts organisation based in another Methodist church building within the Circuit.

They had worked with other community groups at various times to start initiatives such as (for example) a community festival and community harvest scheme with local allotment holders to give away produce, and a craft project, supported by a programme of interns. These developments were underpinned by regular prayer for the church's engagement with the local community, starting with one-off prayer nights, which they link to the development of a local 'Street Pastors' scheme.

Alongside the worship and prayer space of the sanctuary, the church also developed part of their building into a café refectory space for all. This is run by a business tenant with whom they now work collaboratively (e.g. to enable people using the café to go for prayer at particular times, and to sell craft goods made by the church group). The rent from this arrangement has also freed up resources to support the wider church's work and ministry team, particularly the work with students. At the same time, church leaders had provided support for those with existing links to churches to engage in activities designed to deepen their own spiritual development, by running a series of discipleship courses.

In particular, they had run a year-long leadership course called 'Ignite', which involved training, mentoring and mission opportunities, and had included people from across the wider District in this alongside those from the local church. This was seen by the leaders as having supported the spiritual growth of the church, as well as intending to "help build the next generation in ... by being intentional, by sharing, by praying



into it”, including asking God to send people to them. Having originally been started with wider national support and tutors from a national pioneer network of churches, a mixture of local lay and ordained leaders were now able to lead this group, with wider participation and sharing, and they were now able to also run the course in another local church.

Whilst the charismatic approach this had taken was not always comfortable for everyone in the church, the learning gained through this had been seen locally as having been important for supporting growth by enabling some people to move into leadership roles from having previously been on the fringes of the church community, and building a collaborative leadership group. Through a range of different small group opportunities (such as this and a ‘journeying on’ group which had run for a time), the leaders described the process involved as “a gentle drawing on ... we encourage openness to the Lord, and let the Lord do the work, really.” This was designed to create spaces which nurtured and supported people who wanted to become more mature disciples.

These examples begin to show how those within the churches saw growing in faith themselves, both individually and collectively, as an important part of being a growing church. However, most of the churches went beyond this, by engaging in intentional reflection on how growth of their own faith and forms of numerical growth might be connected. This included creating spaces and opportunities where these connections between different types of growth were a focus of conversation, and formed part of their worship and life together as a church community. For example, small groups within at least two of the churches had decided to follow short courses where reflecting specifically on issues of church growth was the focus of the content.

The creation of these spaces enabled groups to think and pray about church growth together; within these spaces, they could consider how they might be being willing to do their part, whilst emphasising their recognition that spiritual and numerical growth was ultimately down to God. Such groups were not the sole stimulus for growth—indeed, arguably in some of the churches they started after growth had begun.

However, they did help churches to begin to name what was going on, to think further about it, and to draw in a wider range of people to support the process of growth in that context. These discussions typically did not focus on changing others in an instrumental way to increase church attendance. Instead, what emerged from these discussions, and was reflected in the materials chosen, was that numerical growth was a natural ‘fruit’ which grew out of faithful engagement with others, through being open to finding new ways to live out the Gospel and change themselves through this. For example, the ‘Come Vine with Me’ groups at Spennymoor (discussed previously) had decided together to follow short course materials titled ‘Fruitfulness on the Frontline’ (London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2014).

These materials included short video clips and discussion starter questions, which created space for this collective reflection and prompts for considering what they might change as a group or church to support growth more widely in their context.

## Developing new spaces for spiritual growth through participation - An extended example: 'The Bridge', Ponteland Methodist Church



Ponteland Methodist Church is an established church with 124 attendees in 2014. It is located on a row of shops and restaurants in a relatively affluent area, on a busy intersection of a small town near Newcastle airport, about 8 miles from the city centre. Statistically the church had a historically falling membership overall (down by 22.5% over 5 years), but the church had begun to be cited as an example of growth particularly due to the influence of one specific initiative. This initiative had begun to attract new participants despite numerical decline in the wider congregation.

To begin the growth on this initiative, one minister had invited around a large number of people (including some who didn't attend church services and others who had disengaged from the church over recent years) to a collective dinner to listen to their perspectives; around 40 people came and 15 wanted to do something new.

This core group decided to set up 'The Bridge' as a more contemporary service in 2013, incorporating a focus on contemporary life issues and Biblical teaching.

The group reported that "We all felt a calling to be here and be involved in this", and despite describing their first attempt as "terrible" and "awful", they persisted. Central to the success

of this initiative from their perspective has been its participative nature—from the beginning, the people involved felt able to have collective ownership of the process of developing this experimental initiative, and to develop it together. Whilst good quality, professionally-designed advertising has been produced to support this, personal invitations seemed to be the main reason that a wider range of new people had begun to attend.

The service runs in the church hall, where a new sound system funded by the church has been installed to enable more contemporary worship using guitars and backing tracks. The more informal character of the service made it easier for families and a small group of people with learning difficulties to attend with their carers, and for many different people to contribute in different ways.

This initiative had been developed in a broader context which had enabled it to happen. This context included a supportive superintendent, and an involved probationer minister who was supporting a lay leadership team. These leaders made the strategic and practical decisions as a team, and co-ordinated the Bridge around other activities, including two more traditional Sunday services.

The wider congregation ensured the sound management of the building and provided other practical help. With District and Connexional support, the wider Circuit had begun to explore the American United Methodist Church Bishop Robert Schnase's (2007) 'Five Practices for Fruitful Congregations' as a way of building growth more widely across the Circuit.

These five practices ("Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk Taking Mission and Service, Extravagant Generosity") resonate strongly with the findings from our research.

## 4. Participatory and collaborative leadership

Collaborative forms of leadership were a significant factor in enabling growth when they linked together the factors discussed so far. These collaborative forms of leadership enabled people to develop their own contributions and discipleship alongside others, as they became collectively involved in teams which were renewing the life of the Church in that place. These collaborative teams combined ways of contributing practically as part of the church community's activities with accessible opportunities to explore and develop a Christian faith if participants wished. In doing so, for those who had decided to explore what the Christian faith might mean for their lives, these activities enabled a form of discipleship in practice, as part of a supportive community centred on following Jesus. By being open to others helping, churches thus offered opportunities to become part of the extended church family and start their own discipleship journey through

this. At the same time, by opening opportunities to a wider range of people within the existing church community to take on leadership roles, the spiritual development of those participating was supported and the capacity of the church to engage in mission multiplied. However, as the rest of this report makes clear, the degree of participation required for this to be effective in building participants' belonging involved more than just letting other people volunteer in existing activities. It also involved more than just letting people volunteer in those things that existing church members wanted to happen anyway. Instead, it involved a process of people building a real sense of ownership of how the church was changing and being able to shape activities in responsive ways, whilst connecting this in accessible ways to opportunities for spiritual growth and discipleship as part of the wider Church's purpose.

### **An example of participatory and collaborative leadership in action across a church community**

One steward the researchers spoke to was part of the largest team of stewards that the lead researcher had ever encountered. This steward was asked who was a leader in their church. They gave a long list of over 10 lay people for starters, which overlapped only a little with a further list of 10 people involved in youth activities, and a longer list of additional people who led particular groups which ran during the week. In this church, the researcher heard several times during interviews that "Everyone pulls together when something needs doing."

A one-off celebratory service was organised in this church, inviting everyone (from the youngest to the oldest) who contributed to the church and its community activities throughout the week. In this service, everyone was given an opportunity to speak about the work that their group did, and affirmed and celebrated as part of the church community. A huge range of people in different leadership roles were represented in this service, including: leaders of particular groups which met throughout the week; those leading particular activities in the wider community; local preachers; a team of church stewards (who managed a wide range of responsibilities including the building and co-ordinating pastoral support); young people (who helped out and saw their role as setting an example for the rest of the church), etc. The staff team here had adopted a collaborative approach that encouraged everyone to share their gifts within a facilitating oversight structure. The staff also encouraged them to reflect on their own discipleship journey in the process of doing this, both individually and collectively as particular groups and as a church as a whole. At the same time, there was a porous boundary with the wider community, enabling those who were not necessarily Christians to contribute to the church's life. This included running some of the community groups taking place in the building and taking on supportive roles.

For example, one of the researchers spoke after the celebratory service with an extended family, whose members variously contributed to the food bank, attended some of the youth groups, and occasionally attended special services. Despite not always agreeing with all aspects of church doctrine, these family members reported valuing the church as a place where they could discuss issues of faith and spirituality

openly and honestly, whilst feeling part of the community there. For example, one older son commented that even though they “don’t believe all of what’s said, ... it is good to be somewhere where that is accepted and I can still be part of the church”. This had enabled them to follow through on promises they had chosen to make at the baptism of another son. This younger son had been the first person to show one of the researchers around “their church”, and had described publically the value they attributed to discussing the Christian faith in some youth groups. Even though young people such as this had been observed sometimes displaying behaviour which had disrupted planned group activities, at other times, the same young people had offered substantial practical help with running them. In the celebratory service, this young person had publically described their own sense of how being part of the church community was enabling them to explore the Christian faith and discipleship with others.

### An example of a specific initiative: Setting up the ‘Trinity Youth Project’, Spennymoor

The ‘Trinity Youth Project’ initiative developed from a group of volunteers, working with a lay worker, who had decided that they wanted to build relationships with local young people over time, to help the church respond to their needs. To do this, they had started by doing outreach work with a trolley to consult young people about what they would like to see happen in their area. They had then successfully involved these young people in the resulting Friday night drop-in session, which had been created in a specially-converted space in a former caretaker’s house next to the church.

Converting this space had involved creating a drop-in space with comfortable seating, internet access, television screens and gaming consoles, a kitchenette to make drinks, etc. This had involved the group working together on sustained fundraising efforts internally and externally, as well as working through the necessary ways of working to ensure this was safe for all.

A lay worker with a particular outreach focus had been instrumental in supporting this team to come together and agree their approach, and had worked with other leaders in the church to build support for the initiative. However, developing this initiative had also required support from the minister in pastoral charge of the congregation, those responsible for the building, local agencies, etc. Most of the young people attending had no other connection to the church. The team were happy to talk about the Christian faith and its relevance for their lives when any young people asked, and invite them to participate in other activities if they wanted to explore this further. However, the focus during this session was on responding to young people’s concerns about having a safe and warm space to go. When these sessions were observed by the researchers, multiple needs were evident amongst some of the young people attending, including risk of violence, alcohol and drug use when not attending the session, lack of family support, etc. The team members shared out roles during the sessions to ensure that everyone was clear what they were doing that night, and that different spaces within the drop-in were staffed (e.g. someone on the door, someone in the kitchen, others talking to young people who attended in the main space, etc.). Different team members brought different skills and professional backgrounds to support this. They also met between sessions and collectively decided how to plan for the future and overcome any challenges they had identified, including what policies to introduce and how best to support each other during each session. This work together was understood by the team members as showing the love of Christ to the young people, and that the church cared about them in whatever situation they were in.





## 5. Enabling change and overcoming barriers to growth

Leaders in these growing churches saw it as essential to find ways to enable a process of change which supported growth, whilst recognising and overcoming any barriers to growth identified within that context. Change was particularly enabled through leaders who:

- **Had a vision** (individually and/or collectively) to do something different which generated initial momentum. This was important even if those concerned were not sure initially what should be done, or how it could be achieved.
- **Modelled trying to do something new themselves**, without worrying about the potential for failure, whilst encouraging others to do the same. **Drawing on ideas from elsewhere** (e.g. from newsletters, conversations with other churches, conferences, etc.) was helpful in supporting this process, but only if these ideas were adapted and contextualised in ways that worked for that particular place.
- **Built rapport and quality relationships** with a wide range of people. These leaders (whether lay or ordained) had built considerable amounts of trust from those within and beyond the church. This included leaders getting to know the gifts of those currently engaged, and seeking out those who had left, had become disengaged or had never previously had contact with the church.
- **Enabled others to come together** to reflect and decide on the changes needed, and/or what new they would like to see happen, and helped them to make it happen. For example, this included nurturing initial ideas that people came up with. It also involved constructive and reflective questioning which helped people to think through their ideas together and plan how they could happen, as well as to review and continually develop them based on their emerging experience. In the less common instance of more directive leadership styles being used, this was associated with more concern over longer term sustainability once the leader left.
- **Broke down complex traditional roles (where these didn't fit contemporary circumstances) into more manageable smaller tasks, and shared them out amongst a wider team of people.** This made it possible for a wider range of people to contribute, and people more likely to volunteer to help with them; e.g. breaking down the role of church treasurer into smaller roles such as counting the offering on particular weeks, and separating the role of day-to-day book keeping from the role of producing the annual accounts.
- **As far as possible, brought the wider church along with them, by encouraging those in the wider church to support those involved in trying new things**, or at least ensured that they did not obstruct them, whilst ensuring any permissions required were granted to allow these new things to be tried. Oversight which was permissive of trying new things, whilst providing a supportive framework of accountability and encouragement, was a key feature of those contexts seen as supportive to change. This permissive oversight was often apparent as operating at multiple levels, and worked best when all these levels supported each other in the change process; e.g. a circuit superintendent giving permission and supporting circuit resources, a local minister in pastoral charge encouraging locally, group leaders running activities, active local preachers connecting these activities with preaching and worship whilst supporting volunteers in reflecting theologically on what they were doing, mutual encouragement being provided amongst volunteer teams, etc.
- **Leaders' skills in handling conflict** were crucially important across most of the case studies, particularly in encouraging people to move beyond any past disputes, whilst not letting a small minority of vocal opposition prevent change.

“You need a regular contact with your congregation and with your leaders, and you need to try to do that bit of healing or try to help it to happen.”

(Minister)

- **Developing local leaders fast enough** to maintain the momentum of growth remained a key challenge when growth did take off within a particular newer grouping. This was particularly the case when there were large generational, cultural and/or other gaps between the established older members and those newly coming into the church.

## **An example of enabling change and overcoming barriers: Beginning to turn around a formerly-declining church**

Trinity Methodist Church in Blaydon is a very small church in a relatively deprived but recently renewed urban centre in the north west of Gateshead. The church here had previously been close to closure, but had begun to show a small and gradual numerical growth according to Connexional statistics since 2010, reaching an official average Sunday attendance of 8 people in 2014. The extent of the actual very recent and rapid growth was not fully reflected in these statistics. At the time of the research, 15-20 people were regularly observed attending a weekend service, and hence it had grown very quickly and disproportionately in relation to its size.

This was complemented by widespread recognition of this recent growth, a turnaround in outlook and building momentum for growth. Rather than there being an assumption that the church would eventually close, instead the church was now attracting a significant investment of ministerial time and financial resources in the building as the church had reinvigorated its links with the local community.

The church was widely recognised as now being highly engaged in a range of social action projects. These included campaigns over benefit sanctions, distributing Christmas hampers and supporting the local foodbank (through space to distribute and store food as well as time), as well as providing space for community activities (such as a large craft group with around 70 members, a slimming group, etc.).

This change was facilitated by the Circuit deciding to invest strategically in this church, particularly through investing in the time of a minister. Having originally sought a presbyter, when one was not appointed, they realised that a deacon (sharing their time mainly between this and one other church in the Circuit) would suit this role better. One of the initial tasks this deacon did when appointed was to update the membership lists based on current participation.

On paper, this resulted in a sudden apparent initial decline in membership, but actually this re-evaluation formed a more realistic and accurate foundation from which to start the subsequent growth.

The deacon worked alongside a small core team of mainly retired people who appeared to help at nearly every event. Some of these had taken on specific roles as stewards (including one with responsibility for the building, and another with responsibility for supporting visiting local preachers at services). However, a notable feature was how quickly many people who encountered the church ended up offering their various gifts and being welcomed in contributing these, whether or not they were yet members of the church.

Renewing the weekend worship has also been a key feature of the change. Whilst there is a relatively traditional (if fairly informal) Methodist service most Sunday mornings at 10.30, once a month this is alternated with a Saturday morning café-style service. Within this café service, hospitality is a central focus, with drinks, pastries and bacon/sausage sandwiches being offered. During the hour-long service, much of the time is spent sitting around tables with crafts and discussion, with only short inputs from the front in the form of prayers, a brief talk and sometimes one or two songs.

The leadership of the deacon has widely been seen as important in contributing to this turnaround, including by setting an example in the way that she engages with people. She has been highly visible outside the church in the wider community and has led the process of change, including introducing changes to the forms of worship.

- Across the case study churches, to the extent that any existing rules were (on prayerful reflection) considered by these leaders to be inhibiting where God was leading them as a congregation, these churches and leaders had tended to concentrate on **following the Spirit** rather than the letter of particular rules. Examples of rules which were sometimes seen as inhibiting growth included whether non-members could hold particular official positions, and several issues concerning local preaching and worship leading requirements. These issues included who could do local preaching and worship leading within fresh expressions of church and similar contexts, and whether the required training was appropriate for them, particularly given the diversity of people concerned and contexts in which they were contributing. On occasions, leaders talked about having the confidence to risk doing things which didn't quite fit current formal requirements, whilst retaining oversight as they sought to discern and follow God in that situation.

“What you want to do doesn't always fit within standard Methodist standing orders and disciplines”

(Minister)

- It was seen by participants as vital to **make strategic decisions to support changes which enabled growth across the case study churches, particularly in terms of prioritising effort, securing resources, and building links between groups**. In the fastest growing cases, this process had involved the church or wider Circuit and/or District deciding to invest funds disproportionately in dedicated paid staff/ministerial time. This time had been focused on enabling growth for an initial period amongst particular groups and/or in particular places which had been identified as having particular potential for growth. To secure these resources, this had sometimes involved creative use of existing assets (e.g. renting out excess space to generate an income), active prioritisation of available funds, and/or securing funding from wider Methodist and other sources. Within churches, participants had made decisions about scheduling to support these strategic decisions; e.g. not running a Sunday service on the week that a café church is running on the Saturday; not running 'The Bridge' service on the weeks when families have been invited to the parade service, etc. However, such decisions were often made in the context of not deciding to constantly cut back overall with ever-diminishing resources; instead,

they involved building momentum for growth whilst investing (even if only initially on a fixed-term basis in faith) to support it. Creative forms of prioritisation also sometimes involved recognising where a particular congregation did not feel they had particular skills, such as (in one case) in children's work. In these cases, rather than this feeling stopping the church from doing anything at all, the church had just started by working with other groups in the first instance, where they felt more able to start, and building momentum from there.

- **Building relationships (and sometimes managing tensions) between different congregations** was a key concern for leaders. Leaders often spoke about encountering friction between different groups of people, often stimulated when new people became part of the church community through growth. Within this, a key focus of leaders had been retaining the dynamism and developmental potential of the new groups, seeking to not let these be too constrained by existing ones. Leaders had sought to address any tensions by providing some opportunities for the different people involved to get to know each other better, whilst encouraging them to value each other's contributions to the church community as a whole.
- **Adapting to diverse cultures and languages was both an opportunity and a barrier** when trying to serve more than one group simultaneously with limited resources. For example, in the Chinese congregation, there was a frequent need to work between Cantonese, Mandarin and English languages, striving as far as possible to welcome all whilst recognising different cultures and generational differences amongst those attending. There was also a need to consider the needs of families which incorporated different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and how the churches listened to and collectively responded to these.
- **Methodist understandings of membership** were similarly seen as both an opportunity and barrier to growth. For many participants, there was a lack of clarity about what formal membership meant; a few (including some who were making substantial contributions in particular churches) found the concept a block to the extent that becoming a member was seen as a pre-requisite requirement to their participation in the church. This particularly affected those who actively did not want to be members of the church as an institution, despite participating in their own discipleship journey, making substantial contributions and even leading

in particular practical roles day-to-day. One helpful response to this was a proactive approach at Blaydon which involved sharing a simple explanation of what membership does and doesn't involve in a brief leaflet (including answering common concerns about whether this involved giving up affiliations to other denominations, for example). This was co-ordinated with an invitation to find out more and if those interested then wished to take this forward, they were invited to become publically accepted into membership alongside others within a particular service. At the same time, there remained an acceptance of those who wished to participate and contribute without yet taking this step.

■ **Whilst transfer growth** from people who had previously attended other churches was a factor in the growth of some of the congregations studied (e.g. see the example of Marton, overleaf), this had often occurred in contexts where church closures or participants' disenchantment with previous churches may have otherwise led to people stopping attending a church altogether.

■ **Being ecumenically inclusive** was important, given that those with whom the churches had come into contact often had diverse histories of engagement with other churches. Often, as previously noted, this had included some people with previous experiences of church conflict and/or feeling they had been treated badly in churches. Many of those newly participating had fluid ecumenical journeys between several different denominations over the course of their lives, including those who had not made a Christian commitment. Some participants continued to engage across different denominations. Inclusive theologies which did not discriminate against particular groups were often cited as a key reason people felt at home.

■ Responses by churches which involved various forms of **informal links with neighbouring churches and mutual co-ordination of their activities** helped those people (especially couples and families) with multiple denominational and/or cultural links in these situations. Such responses demonstrated an inclusive approach and understanding of the Christian faith more collectively with other churches. Examples of this included the Chinese church above, and the way that the Methodist church in Spennymoor co-ordinated activities with an Anglican church nearby which had converted its hall into a community café and other community facilities.



## OTHER EXAMPLES OF ENABLING CHANGE AND OVERCOMING BARRIERS

### Example 1: Building up a Chinese congregation

Newcastle Chinese Methodist Church currently meets in the building of Brunswick Methodist Church in the city centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, just off a main shopping street in the heart of the city. It had moved to these larger premises after previously meeting in Jesmond Methodist Church, one of the other case study churches in this city. Rapid growth in the numbers of those attending had been reported since an initial 'class' had been first formed in 2008.

This group had become a separately registered church congregation in 2012. In a city where 0.9% of the population is of Chinese ethnicity (according to the latest estimates by ONS, 2011), and larger numbers are of mixed ethnicity, the leaders of this church had seen it as important to build an improved engagement with this part of the wider population. This had been supported by a creative wider oversight structure for ministering to Chinese communities that had been established at a regional level, across the two Methodist Districts in the North East.

This supportive structure had enabled a specialist minister to be appointed for this ministry, supported by a team of lay workers, with congregations now based in three different cities across the region. The Newcastle Chinese Methodist congregation now normally met for a service conducted in Cantonese later on a Sunday morning. This happened after the meeting time

of the main Brunswick congregation, which is conducted in English and is predominantly White British in ethnicity.

The researchers found that wider reports of rapid growth accorded with the perspectives of those with direct experience of the congregation over its lifespan, although the historical statistical records were particularly patchy for this congregation. As an indication of current size, at a special Chinese new year service attended during the research, attendance exceeded 87 (including around 31 children).

The exact numbers were difficult to count due to a much higher degree of people of all ages coming in and out of the main church room throughout the service than might be expected for other congregations meeting in this church. This pattern of engagement was something which appeared to be part of the accepted way that people participated within this service and fitted the needs and availability of those attending.

Building up this congregation had particularly entailed overcoming the barriers of diverse languages and culture, supported by a dedicated ordained minister and lay ministry team who understood the culture and could work across the languages involved. It had also involved fluid relationships with other Chinese Christian groups in the city, with activities often being seen by participants as mutually supporting.

### Example 2: Incorporating people from a church's closure

Marton Methodist Church is based in a relatively white and affluent suburb of Middlesbrough, meeting in a 1970's church building, but with a foundation in the pub opposite. Statistically, this church was a relatively large church at 95 attendees, with growth across a range of different measures. Sunday attendance had grown by 63% over 5 years, and the congregation had experienced a 12% increase in membership over the same period. A significant proportion of

this growth consisted of people transferring from another church, which had closed in 2012. The way in which people who had transferred had become integrated in the church community was seen as an important success factor here. There had also been other gentle wider growth before and after this too. Pastoral care throughout this transition was seen as key to this process being managed in a way which supported continued growth throughout.

# Conclusions and reflections in light of wider literature

This research summary has provided just one brief snapshot of six particular churches in particular places, each with their own histories, opportunities, challenges and limitations to growth in their context. Their experiences may not be generalizable to every church everywhere. Indeed, instead, those involved in leading these churches emphasised how important it is that local Christians respond to their local context, as they seek to pray, live, learn and develop as a church community, and seek to respond to where they understand God is leading them in their area. However, by considering this range of different Methodist churches in the North East of England, the research does illustrate:

1. That there are **different perspectives on what growth means**, and how growth can take a range of forms.
2. **That these forms of growth and change can happen across very different churches and areas**, and are not restricted to any one size, type or location of church.
3. **How growth is understood to be supported** within the particular lives of these churches, including how different aspects of these churches' lives may work together in the wider social and ecclesial context to help or hinder this growth from happening.

As researchers, we hope that this summary of our research findings provides an accessible way for churches to begin reflecting critically and constructively on patterns which are contributing to growth and decline in their own context. We also hope it will provide a springboard for readers to consider further the wider set of literature and research on church growth that is available; such literature engages more comprehensively with important continuing debates on church growth and decline, and what is contributing to these, empirically and theologically, including Biblical perspectives.

Rather than engaging comprehensively with these in this summary, instead we have focused on summarising the empirical findings from our own research, including the perspectives reported by the research respondents. However, we would recognise the importance of setting these findings within these wider perspectives and debates, and recognise that many of the themes

found within our empirical data from these cases resonate strongly with previous wider literature. Within this literature, we would also recognise there are also various guides which claim to provide 'how to' guides for leading churches into growth (such as Mann, 2014; Stetzer and Dodson, 2007). At the same time, it is clear that there are also substantial differences and debates within this literature (e.g. see Jackson, 2015; Goodhew, 2012, 2015; Towns et al, 2004 for a sample of perspectives). There are also some reflections which are critical of focusing on some understandings of church growth (e.g. Olson, 2002; Robinson and Yarnell, 1993). Hence, rather than go into a text-by-text comparison with these or other studies and publications within this summary, or try to comprehensively explore the extent to which our data matches or diverges from any particular one, we instead offer here a concluding reflection to draw our findings together across the diverse cases studied.

Our data supported those views of growing churches **which see these as being 'centred sets' of people, which often have fuzzy boundaries** that keep them open to others participating for the first time; participation in these 'centred sets' is defined by the degree to which participants are becoming focused on Jesus as the centre of their particular church community (see Hiebert, 1979). This view is typically contrasted (including by Hiebert) with an alternative view of churches as 'bounded sets' in which those who are 'in' and those who are 'out' are more clearly defined by institutional rules, and where much energy goes into determining and maintaining this boundary. In terms of the nature of the 'fuzzy boundaries', Wenger's (1998:100) concept of **"legitimate peripheral participation"** came frequently to mind when analysing our data about how people became involved and how they began to feel they belonged. In this context, this concept suggests that participation in (and ultimately belonging as part of) a particular "community of practice" (in this case a community of discipleship within a local church) can be facilitated when:

- (i) people are enabled to join in;
- (ii) people are validated in their participation; and

(iii) these participants are able to learn through this participation what being a member of that community involves.

This learning can be further enhanced for everyone involved when the wider church community are enabled to reflect together with the newer participants on what being a growing church means, and how everyone can contribute to and learn from each other in this process.

Within our data, the case study churches had found it important to make intentional spaces for spiritual development and to support the growth in faith of individuals and groups more collectively, including through prayer, worship and Bible study. However, the data also indicated **how important it was that these churches were willing to be transformed** through their responsive engagement with local communities in all their diversity. Thus growth happened in the process of combining their own continued journeys of growth in the Christian faith themselves with their responsive engagement with others. Such processes of mutual engagement challenged any tendencies for these churches to just seek to ‘make people like us’, but rather instead encouraged them to grow together as they sought to follow Christ.

In doing this, these churches also worked with and welcomed those from other Christian traditions and churches, whilst enabling these people to continue or renew their own discipleship journey in a supportive Methodist community. This open inclusiveness has resonances with the historic relationship some early Methodist societies sought to have with the Anglican Church in particular (as represented in Joint Implementation Commission, 2008:5).

The change process in these churches calls to mind the words of a young person reflecting on Vincent Donovan’s work as a missionary in Africa. This young person advises churches trying to reach new people: “do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before”

(Donovan, 2005:xiii).

**Change** was a key part of the story of every church studied, emphasising how change is an important part of growth—this highlights how skills in facilitating and supporting collective change and ongoing learning are important for those leading in this context (e.g. see Hawkins, 1997).

Even where new groups (including groups focused on discipleship development and groups which had become new worship services/congregations) had been established within these case study churches, it was interesting to note how the resulting **new groups had usually retained some forms of support from and connections with existing congregations and structures**. Whilst this occasionally created tensions between the old and new, the focus in most of these initiatives was not on the new groups seeking to become discrete, entirely self-sufficient and separate new entities in future. Instead, these new activities generally remained being seen as part of a wider integrated and connected set of church communities. This might be seen as a renewed form of the Methodist principle of Connexionalism, in which any new expressions of church formed through these processes of change (when given flexible support and oversight) can form part of the refreshing and renewing of the wider Church. Studying such groups qualitatively in the Methodist Church in the context of wider congregational change may have much to offer to the ongoing debate over “fresh expressions of church” and their connections with other more established forms of church, on which research by George Lings has been significant (e.g. see Lings, 2016).

Similarly, in the complex current context, it is important to consider **whether congregational practices and wider church structures are enabling growth or just managing decline**. The Connexional structure of the Methodist Church in Britain, and the Circuit system in particular, offers opportunities to focus resources and prioritise particular churches at important points in their growth cycle, to support them even when local church resources are low. In the examples in this research, this structure had worked well to support additional staff who could then help others locally to generate momentum in some of the case studies, including through sharing resources across Circuits and in the form of wider District investment, etc. However, it was also seen as acting as a brake on this momentum for growth at times, particularly where initiatives involved complex processes of securing resources and seeking



multiple permissions. The itinerant nature of ordained stipendiary Methodist ministry meant that ministers were keen to build in sustainability before they moved on, particularly by enabling local participation and developing local leaders. However, this itinerant nature of ordained stipendiary ministry was also seen as a barrier where key staff might move on too quickly and be replaced by others who were less supportive of the types of growth which had been started. There were also concerns about those places where this system of stationing ordained ministers tended to spread ministers too thinly across multiple congregations for them to be able to provide the kinds of intensive initial interventions which in some of these case studies had helped to kick-start growth. In this context, the enabling of collaborative ways of working and leading together becomes even more central to the process of starting and/or sustaining church growth.

This however leads us back to conclude that it is the

**central role of trusted individuals and small teams** which had played such significant roles in beginning, building and sustaining momentum for change in the case study churches that were researched. The research shows that, whilst building a welcoming and inclusive culture matters, **the willingness of particular people to step out in faith** on a journey of church growth made a significant difference. Such people had sought to be focused on Christ and take holy risks, whilst supportively handling processes of change as their church sought to be more responsive and intentional in seeking to involve others. Ultimately, for those in churches like these which are seeking to grow within local communities, realising a vision of growth involves a continuation of their own journeys as disciples together. At the same time, it involves responding to local communities and inviting others to join in their own discipleship journeys alongside them, so that together, they can consider **“how do we best embody the Gospel in this place?”**

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- Broader descriptions of local areas and populations where not otherwise referenced are based on the latest data available at: <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>.

## What is enabling and inhibiting growth in Methodist churches?

This free summary shares the findings of research that was funded by the Methodist Church between 2015-2016 which set out to:

- Consider the patterns relating to church attendance and membership (based on statistical records) for the North East of England.
- Learn what was supporting and inhibiting growth within six very different Methodist churches selected from within this context.

Please use this summary:

- To consider how the experiences of these churches might relate to those in your own context; *and*
- As a discussion starter, to think about growth in relation to your own church, and how any barriers to this might be overcome.